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## ABSTRACT

Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray posits the paradox of the female speaker-subject becoming an agent of the masculine role of oration whenever she speaks. My art explores this same dilemma through *visual language*, navigating the space between my role as the artist-subject and image-object. This duality incites alienation, catalyzing the fragmentation of self that surfaces in both my representational and abstracted pieces of work.

My art is a collection of bodies and faces that speak through movement, tone, line, stance and expression. When represented, the stripped body becomes a site of revulsion and eroticism, static paralysis and transformation, youth and its inevitable dissolution. I provide a renewed and personalized interpretation of traditional approaches to rendering the female. When I work with my own body, I often portray its cultural signification as object and inescapable physical tie to passivity. Just as my lived female body cannot be excised from a background dictated by histories of violence and subjugation, its two-dimensional counterpart cannot exist outside the cultural prelude of the art nude. My language being already dictated, I have worked within its framework to construct images that disrupt the way these tropes have previously been read.

In what ways can I speak through illustrating my body if we are trained to assume the voyeuristic gaze when confronted with an image of the naked female? By treating the physical language of the passive sexual body bluntly and grotesquely, I imbue predetermined notions of the erotic body with a more historically *masculine* humanism. In my work, sex plays the role of illuminating the body's corporeality. I am interested in the *naked* rather than the *nude*.

The Eye and the Not I:  
The female artist as subject and object

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(CD-ROM)

«Я входил вместо дикого зверя в клетку,  
 выжигал свой срок и кликуху гвоздем в бараке,  
 жил у моря, играл в рулетку,  
 обедал черт знает с кем во фраке.  
 С высоты ледника я озираю полмира,  
 трижды тонул, дважды бывал распорот.  
 Бросил страну, что меня вскормила.  
 Из забывших меня можно составить город.»<sup>1</sup>

—Joseph Brodsky

We live through our experiences—the terrible, the mundane, the beautiful—and our bodies become the sites of record. However much we aim to suppress or ignore so that we can keep on living, physicality betrays the fantasy of psychological control. My own life and all history surrounding it, shared cultures and shared experiences, can be read in the surface of my flesh. This notion comes to the forefront of my work, a collection of bodies and faces that speak through movement, tone, line, stance and expression. They range from distorted fleshy landscapes to narrative illustrations to visceral abstractions but are bound by a primary basis in self-portraiture. I look at my body through mirrors, photographs, memories and dreams, and I capture it. Without trying, the act of creating constructs a language all my own. In regard to writing poetry, Joseph Brodsky mused that “if art teaches anything—to the

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Brodsky, *Урания* (Ардис: Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1987), 177. (Translation: I have walked among caged wild beasts, carved my term and nickname into the barracks, lived by the sea, played roulette, dined with the devil-knows-whom, dressed to the nines. I observed half the world from the height of a glacier, thrice I drowned, twice I was ripped to shreds. I quit the country that raised me. You could make a city from those who have forgotten me.)

artist, in the first place—it is the privateness of the human condition.”<sup>2</sup>

Conscious or not, these simple images reveal the complex emotional and psychological ranges that emerge when we look at our own bodies or realize ourselves looking at the bodies of others.

I have found time and time again that when represented, the stripped body becomes a site of revulsion and eroticism, static paralysis and transformation, youth and its inevitable dissolution. The image of life, particularly in the context of sexuality, inevitably reminds us of its antitheses—destruction and death. I provide a renewed and personalized interpretation of traditional approaches to rendering the female body that stands separately from the “objectified, naked women, who are shown as powerless, often faceless, and passive, available flesh.”<sup>3</sup> When I work with my own body, I often portray its cultural signification as object and inescapable physical tie to passivity. Just as my lived female body cannot be excised from a background dictated by histories of violence and subjugation, its two-dimensional counterpart cannot exist outside the cultural prelude of the art nude. I have worked to alter the viewer’s understanding of these notions through sculptures, videos, photographs, drawings, and prints. My language

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Brodsky, “Uncommon Visage” in *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1995), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Werkner, “The Child-Woman and Hysteria: Images of the Female Body in the Art of Schiele, in Viennese Modernism, and Today” in *Egon Schiele: Art, Sexuality and Viennese Modernism* ed. by Patrick Werkner (The Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, Inc: California, 1994), 77.

being already dictated, I have worked within its framework to construct images that disrupt the way these tropes have previously been read.

In “*Proteus*” (work #1), I photograph the movement my flesh, distorted by my own hands. I look at the mutability of fat and skin, juxtaposing it with the similarly flexible mouth. These fragmented images of external parts of my body allude to both the intertwined physical and symbolic *internal* referents. I pry my lips across the span of my face; the act of forcing-open negates the mouth’s function of speech and sound, rendering it little more than a hole, or a lack. Simultaneously, this image displays the eroticization of the open mouth as site of sexual pleasure. I posit the distortion of the open oral vessel with a similar movement against the flesh that encloses the womb. In doing so, I question what it means to inhabit a body physically built to be filled. By treating the physical language of the passive sexual body bluntly and grotesquely, I imbue predetermined notions of the erotic body with a more historically *masculine* humanism. Here, sex plays the role of illuminating the body’s corporeality. I am interested in the *naked* rather than the *nude*.

This distinction opens the issue of the difference between intent and perception. In what ways can I speak through illustrating my body if we are trained to assume the voyeuristic gaze when confronted with an image of the naked female? I look toward the ways that Tracey Emin addresses this strange relationship between exhibitionism and self-expression through the nude female self-portrait in a number of works in her 2009 solo show “*Only God*



*Knows I'm Good.*" She displays the female body through sexual language, but it does not carry the weight of aesthetic eroticism. The elements of the form are all present, but, like *Proteus*, they distort into figures that are incomplete, figures that change shape and recede into themselves. In "*Just Like Nothing*," Emin blacks out her own face, evoking what is both a masochistic desire to destroy the self and an invitation for the viewer to empathize with her position. She pairs concise text with these images, allowing us to construct a relatable narrative. These actions restore presence to what is hidden and unsaid by creating a space for us to determine our own associations in conjunction with her representations of the lived-in human body.

Like Tracey Emin, my body is my medium. I strip off my clothes, turn on the harsh fluorescent lights, and photograph my body in its barest vulnerability. I alternate between positions of eroticized openness and contorted shriveled stances, drawing attention to untamed flesh. I scrutinize each frame confining the transience of moving mechanism to dualistic death and immortality in stillness. I search for the lines that build the body and record them through print and line, flattened onto paper. I improvise that which seems to be indiscernible, combining the lens and the line. My hand inevitably alters my body's photographic simulation. The face contorts with the addition of heavily applied shadows, overstating a sense of emotional expression and precocious aging. The eyes stare outward, forcing the viewer to

confront the central subject. I often sweep over the skin with yellow ochre, a tone that for me is out of context yet seems completely natural. Here, the female form does not adhere to the polarized roles of the erotic object or the powerless victim. It simply reflects the tolls of living as they mark the body and the mind, denoting agency through what seems to be a passive acceptance of its situation. The self-portrait is a private performance, a series of acts that allow me to summon the viewer into my experiences through graphic representations of my body.

German Expressionist Egon Schiele wrote to Leopold Czihaczek that he had always thought “the greatest painters were those who painted figures.”<sup>4</sup> It is one thing to recreate the experience of being *somewhere*, but quite another to recreate the experience of being *someone*. In his drawn self-portrait, Schiele stares at the viewer, accentuating his emaciated figure through dark line and sickly tones within the shadows. He annihilates any semblance of softness when he displays his own form. I adapt this romantic-grotesque in my own work, looking at the figure as a landscape, gaining a glimpse of what it might be like to stand inside of it. The portrait does not serve to monumentalize a persona, nor does it use the body as a symbol of beauty. Like Schiele, I am concerned with portraying “person-ness.” I see parallels between Schiele’s portrait and my own representations of the self. The decadence of art opens a

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<sup>4</sup> Egon Schiele, letter to Leopold Czihaczek, September 1, 1911, in Christian M. Nebehay, *Egon Schiele, 1890-1918: Leben, Briefe, Gedichte* (Salzburg, 1979), 182.

new avenue of understanding my own form, allowing me to confuse pleasure and disgust, beauty and ugliness, a freedom not present in the living body. Obfuscation leads the viewer to see that the living body must simultaneously be a dying body.

This inextricable connection between living and dying is a defining element of my work. Hints of eroticism appear in my portrayals of nakedness, but they are “represented in terms of decay, illness, and death.”<sup>5</sup> Sexuality becomes a metaphor for transcending the body, which is, in the realm of spirituality and mysticism, a consequence of dying. When we return to terms of symbolic exile, sex reveals itself to be the ultimate farce—a condition of escape accessed through the very instrument of its captivity. I suggest this contradiction by drawing attention to ugliness and imperfection. The body bares its failures through discoloration, bruised flesh, anguished expression, wrinkles, fat, and bone. When we consider the erotic nude, we picture youth and attractiveness that surpass the unpleasant elements of realness. George Bataille wrote that “beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled.”<sup>6</sup> I deny the viewer’s satisfaction of scopophilic ownership of a “beautiful” body by destroying it of my own volition. Sexuality is not rendered through the language of erotic fantasy’s potential desecration; instead, it illustrates a complacent acceptance of a body that has already been ruined.

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<sup>5</sup> Werkner, “The Child-Woman and Hysteria,” 59.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1986), 144.

Drawing my own body from its mirrored, dreamt, or photographic double actualizes the distance between physical presence and ethereal likeness. I can imitate how I *look* but not how I *appear*. The subject is fragmented through its depiction as a figure, showing only aspects and distortions of the whole. These parts create a new being, confined to a materiality of representation that transforms the fragment into a singular image, making it more complete than its referent. The constructed body inhabits a life of its own, a perfected duplicity of the self. Representation becomes a vehicle for preserving the living mirrored image. This two dimensional figure is a mimetic variant of what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan defines as the “ideal I.” The “ideal I” arises when the mother holds the infant before a mirror, and he sees himself as already having the ability to stand. He recognizes in his reflection a more complete version of himself, catalyzing “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image.”<sup>7</sup> When I reconstruct a form of myself in a portrait, it becomes an intentional simulation of the infantile recognition of my own body as having presence as both subject and object.

In my work, the camera embodies the role of Lacan’s mirror-stage mother, a vehicle for transcending the limitations of the body. It takes what it in front of it and “mechanically repeats what could never be repeated

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function” in *Ecrits* trans. and ed. by Bruce Fink (Norton and Company: New York, 2004), 4.

existentially.”<sup>8</sup> Something almost mystical happens when the light travels through the lens and hits the film; a moment of myself becomes immortal. The photograph itself becomes the mirror, the space that holds something that seems inarguably real, that inexplicably *was*. Manipulations of light or frame may obscure the referent, but it nevertheless cannot be separated from it in the same manner as any other form of visual representation. French structuralist Roland Barthes eloquently describes this relationship between the photograph and its referent as that which “belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both.”<sup>9</sup> It is this unique quality of the photograph that holds its certain “magical” aura, and is perhaps the reason that I cannot seem to abandon the role of the camera in my work, regardless of the final product’s medium. The lens is an impartial viewer of my body; before it I can transform my face to its made-up iconic glamour, manipulate my flesh, choose what is hidden and displayed. Nevertheless, it is the closest simulation of the *living* I to exist in a still form. I do not perceive my body as it appears in the photograph, but I know that it *was* I, and am therefore unable to deny recognition of a conscious presence in my pictorial duplicate. Paradoxically, it is this sense of alienation arising in my effort to illustrate my body that allows for the viewer to identify with it.

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<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang: New York, 2010), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 6.

I delve into my sense of fascination with this alienation in "*Self-portrait with egg*" (work #2, photograph/mixed media), an exploration of function and aesthetics of my female body. These three images represent my perception of how female beauty, and the desire for it, holds a convoluted connection to the maternal, procreative function of the female body. I reference a mid-twentieth century surrealist aesthetic, an ersatz iconic beauty presented through the medium of my own imperfection. I counter the voyeuristic fantasy of an aloof beauty existing to be seen through the gestures of looking directly toward the camera and pinching my own flesh. Not only am I aware of being looked at—I too am looking. The procreative function of sexuality is proven to be a farce in the face of a flattened erotic image. The egg can be seen as a symbol of fertility, but I use it here as an erotic prop that remains external to the body. "*Self-portrait with egg*" illustrates the exteriority of an expectation to present as the Madonna and the Whore, and my own failures in this paradoxical struggle.

Every one of my images is imbued with the weight of the past as it affects the living present, displaying a contradictory exteriority of being and nonbeing. The drawn body does not reproduce the subject as it is nor as it was. Having worked fervently in former projects to recreate feelings or narratives of my memories, I came to realize the overwhelming extent of psychological projection and distortion through the passage of time. The foreign figures that now fade in and out of my frames have lost corporeal presence. Often faceless, transparent, and missing limbs, they are fleeting instances that cannot be

contained. They are forever ungraspable, accentuating a longing for a relation to the other that can never be achieved. When I scrutinized the phenomenon of fading in imaging otherness, I realized that my self-portraits followed suit. Although I understand them as aspects of myself, they cannot stand in for the subject as a whole.

In "*I fucked three men in three seconds and then the room turned red*" (Work #3), I draw my body as I see it in a moment of a conflagration of pleasure, confusion, and fear. I capture the flood of images and memories that form the moment as it *feels* as opposed to how it looks, for a single frame of an intimate moment cannot capture the weight of the history leading to that instance. In this image, I recreate the physical outlines of bodies of memory. I draw my face and body with age, with a passive stasis that comes through my hand as I repeat the contours of a blurred photograph. I claim the lines of presence with muscularity and darkness, juxtaposed with the fleeting, morphing, moving figures demonstrating what cannot be seen in its entirety. The likeness of my body becomes lost in the pictorial representation of thoughts and feelings that surround its atmosphere.

Manipulating images through print processes and drawing allows me to reconstitute myself as a conceivable object of someone else's perception. The image is a fiction that can be entered and interpreted. I render myself for the viewer's imaginative construction of my subjectivity. In the same way that I draw those around me in an effort to connect with and better understand

them, I think that displaying these images of myself stems from a desire to be understood. I can, however, only go so far as to give the viewer access to aspects of how I *imagine* myself to be. This desire for interconnectedness comes through when I portray my body in relation to others. It is only in the world of pictorial fantasy, in which I replace myself with the “avatar of [the] narcissistic image,” that I am situated on the same plane of subjectivity as those around me.<sup>10</sup> Once drawn, we are identical to one another in our incompleteness. In order to relate to others, we are forced to surrender the illusion of understanding and being understood.

As a female artist, I am constantly torn between my desire to express emotion and experience through my own body and the history accompanying depicting the female form. Becoming both the subject and object of my work inevitably catalyzes fragmentation of the self. The act of speaking through my pieces is assertive, subjective, and masculine through its ability of expression. In rendering my body, I become a sort of voyeur, scrutinizing my body as an object outside its lived experience. Likewise, the selves of my portraits submit to being displayed; they submit to becoming two-dimensional objects, fragmented and reduced iterations of their original referent. I seek to conflate these two halves of myself; the active and passive, object and subject, and the

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire” in *Ecrits* ed. and trans. by Bruce Fink (W.W. Norton and Company: New York, 2004), 295.



eye and the seen, become confused through a visual language that questions the very nature of what is and can be displayed through representation.

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